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ABSTRACT

This speech reviews the qualities and functions of leadership needed by the president of a university, in this case, Rockfeller University. Aspirations and tensions, the purposes of a university, the nourishment of quality, and presidential position are discussed in relation to leadership needs. (MJM)

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# The Importance of Being Different

by Julius A. Stratton

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*The following address was delivered by Julius A. Stratton, chairman of the board of trustees of the Ford Foundation, on the occasion of the installation of Dr. Frederick Seitz as president of the Rockefeller University, New York, October 8, 1968.*

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THESE ARE TIMES when one hesitates over the choice of words to welcome a new president to his university. Should we admire his courage? Should we temper our congratulations with a tinge of compassion? Should we reveal our concern as we wish him well? These are trying days indeed, testing days, for academic leadership. And yet, out of the experience of one who has flown a mission, I can predict with confidence that my friend Fred Seitz will one day look back upon the coming years as the most productive, the most satisfying that life can offer. The task that he begins today will demand all his energies and occupy all his thoughts. But far outweighing the stress and strain that are inseparable from the responsibilities of the president, he may count on that sense of utter personal fulfillment that comes from a total engagement with ideas, with youth, and with the foremost intellectual problems of our age.

Never has there been a time when such problems presented themselves in greater profusion, with greater complexity, or with a more urgent need for solutions. We find ourselves at a moment of history when every value that men have cherished appears open to challenge; when every fortress of conviction seems to be crumbling; when the traditional codes of conduct and moral accountability have begun to blur. Lately, the very institutions of our American democracy of which we had most reason to be proud have come under attack. And among these, emerging as prime targets of the discontented, are the school, the college, and the university.

This afternoon we meet on the campus of an institution which is unique of its kind. By the fact of that uniqueness Rockefeller University has and will escape the turmoil and confusion that have spread across the land. But fortunate though you are, I know that nonetheless, as a part of the total national complex of higher education, you view this turmoil, these disorders that plague the system, with deep concern, as do we all. We cannot remain aloof. We must strive to understand. We must all learn well the lessons of

these difficult times. For the malaise that affects so much of the youth of the country is but one striking symptom of the revolution that is engulfing the whole of our society, a total transformation of the condition of man in this world of ours, sweeping us along so swiftly that we are at a loss to maintain our bearings.

To me there is a bitter irony in the observation that so many of the evils which we now decry in the new America are the products not of failure but of initial success as we have labored towards the achievement of valid goals—goals that even the dissenters of the day would be the very first to acclaim.

As a nation we have created the greatest wealth and established the highest standards of living in all the world. But now we are discovering that gross national product alone is no sufficient measure of the contentment or tranquillity of a people. The all-pervading signs of our tremendous affluence and the new hope that it can be shared have made the disparities of fortune and the burden of individual poverty all the more striking, and quite intolerable.

Or again, no country has endeavored more successfully to turn the progress of science to useful purpose. Over the past half century we have created a stupendous technological power, an almost limitless capacity to dominate the forces of nature according to our wishes. But this freedom of action which we derive from modern technology is expanding more rapidly than our power of foresight, more rapidly than our understanding of the full consequences of each technical innovation. As never before in history, we are masters of our own destiny yet utterly confused about where that destiny lies.

**Aspirations and Tensions**

And of all the paradoxical confrontations of success and disarray, higher education in America offers perhaps the most illuminating example. From the time of Jefferson we have believed in education as the cornerstone of

a successful democracy. With each passing decade we have expanded the base and lifted our sights. No one in this autumn of 1968 need be reminded how far we still fall short of a true equality of opportunity for every American, black or white, rich or poor. Yet I think it well for us to recall from time to time how far we have traveled in a few short generations. How many of us today really grasp that not too long ago *we,* in our own fashion, were an underdeveloped country? How many can visualize the life of a small boy—such as my own father—who crossed the great plains of the American continent in an ox-drawn wagon to the western frontier of Oregon, and there learned arithmetic as well as the elements of Latin and Greek from itinerant schoolteachers who moved from settlement to settlement throughout the winter season.

Today thousands of young men and women are resident at colleges, at universities, and at graduate professional schools in all our fifty states. And it has been precisely the response to their legitimate aspirations that has given rise to those massive institutions of higher learning that now are the focus of attack. Here we have been brought face to face, I believe, with the most perplexing and most critical problem of the modern age. How shall we design and plan and manage the institutions of a true democracy such that all are served, yet such that no individual feels lost and submerged in a sea of anonymity? How to meet the needs of numbers, yet retain a personal scale? These are questions that transcend the university. They relate to industry and the evolving structure of government. And they go directly to the heart of the problems of the city.

It is senseless to imagine that we can reject the past or be granted a new beginning. Even if we were so disposed, we could not abandon those great universities that have contributed in such large measure to the character of American life and that serve to fulfill the ambitions of so many. Human progress is built upon the present, upon things as

they are rather than upon things as they might have been. No one yet can say what the solution to the crisis of the crowded campus may be. We do know that this is a time for imaginative ideas and bold experiments. But if those ideas and those experiments are to succeed, then they must be guided by a deeper understanding than most of us possess of what truly lies at the root of contemporary frustration and discontent.

Are these really no more than the symptoms of mass production, of an impersonality that is inherent in size, and a sense of being swallowed up in the crowd?

Has the privilege of education for many become routine?

Have we failed to delineate goals, to mark out the choices and the incentives of life?

Is a college experience for some merely the thing to do, even an escape from reality?

In the continually extending process of schooling, have we perhaps forgotten that children have matured into men and women?

I suspect that it is all these and many more.

**The Purposes of a University**

These manifestations of unrest of which I have been speaking, the happenings that have plagued some of our largest institutions, have a visible, spectacular quality. They are grist for the press and TV and so have been deeply incised upon the public consciousness. But there are other, more subtle issues, apparent to all of us who have roots in academic life, that may be no less critical to the future of the American university.

Are we, for example, in the process of altering fundamentally the purposes of a university, and if so, how shall we now define them?

We have adequate models to draw upon—from twelfth century Europe, through the Reformation to Matthew Arnold and Cardinal Newman, to the German antecedents of the Johns Hopkins and the University of Chicago, and very importantly, of course, our own land-grant institutions. Today the

call is for relevance and action. There is nothing very novel about such a stand. The whole long course of academic history is marked by a duality of concept, by a shifting balance of influence between those who would turn inward—detached and aloof from the swirling chaos of worldly affairs—and those who would impart to the university an effective, working membership in the contemporary society. It is the timeless interplay of intellectual detachment and active involvement, beautifully illustrated by the founding of the early monastic orders. First, the Benedictines —arising out of the conditions of their age— expressed the *vita contemplativa,* withdrawal from the world, a haven for those seeking inner devotional experience as well as for the scholars and intellectuals of those gloomy days. But they were followed by the Franciscans, the Dominicans, and the Jesuits, all drawn by the magnetism of action—the irresistible appeal of the *vita activa.*

We have come a long way from the idea of the university as simply the custodian of the accumulated wisdom of the past, transmitting to each successive generation the best that man has thought and done. The modern university is much more. It has become also the center from which new knowledge flows, and as such, it is itself a primary generator of change. As I see it, the real crisis for the university in our time—indeed for all education—is how to maintain its intellectual integrity and hold fast to the essence of its ideals while striving to interpret and express them in the context of new science, of new economics, of new politics—in sum, of a totally new world.

No academic institution today can ignore the question of relevance and all that it implies. I have on frequent occasions spoken for the responsibility of the university—with all its diverse resources and disciplines—to take part in the solution of problems which touch most deeply upon the welfare of the community and of our society. Yet all of us must recognize that step by step such commitments lead into an entirely new domain.

To what extent can a university become an instrument of social and political action and still retain its intellectual objectivity?

Is it not conceivable that in a curious fashion the search for relevance may lead ultimately to irrelevance to our initial concern for education?

In our pursuit of relevance do we risk the danger of displacing the solid substance of learning with a variety of activities which may later prove to be of only transitory value?

In the end it is a matter of balance—the reconciliation of two extremes—the eternal counterpoise between learning and action. But it is a balance that must represent a conscious decision to defend the central mission and those special qualities that are the very essence of the university, the tradition of scholarship and the constant striving for intellectual excellence which are vital to all its efforts.

**The Nourishment of Quality**

These thoughts now lead me to express a further observation—a view, I am well aware, by no means acceptable to all. I spoke earlier of our American commitment to education. Steadily we have moved to expand the base, and rightly we have endeavored to lift everywhere our standards. Every state in the Union aspires to a center of excellence, and who can blame them? Yet as one watches the actions of Congress, supported by the mood of the country, I cannot help but fear that the status of institutional *equality* has become more important than the concept of *quality* itself. We seek the highest mean level in the world, but we must never forget that the pace of progress is set not by the mean but rather by the best. It is incumbent upon us all to be the constant, eloquent, passionate protagonists of the first rate. At the same time we must recognize that the best in everything cannot at the same time be everywhere. Nor is it the exclusive preserve of the small or the private as against the large or the public. It may

shine forth in science in one institution, in architecture in another, in medicine here, or in Medieval English there. But without these lofty peaks we shall find ourselves permanently on a plateau. We shall develop into a nation of followers rather than leaders, the achievers of the highest level of mediocrity in the world.

My plea for the nourishment of quality carries with it an equally fervent belief in the importance of being different—a belief that we must protect and encourage the individual and the special. One of our proudest boasts has been the diversity of our educational pattern, the concept of many paths to learning. In this diversity of approach lies our strength and our hope for the future. Yet as I look at the American scene today, the number of institutions that are set apart from others by their own style and by their own objectives seems to me far too few. Increasingly they tend to show the marks of a common mold. But now, of all times, we must jealously guard the need and the right to be different. It is, as I said earlier, a time for bold experiments, for imaginative innovations, and for models of superb achievement to serve as beacons along the way, examples to be emulated and perhaps even surpassed.

The real meaning to me of Rockefeller University lies precisely in its unfailing aspiration for quality, for being the best in its chosen field. You have had the wisdom and the courage to mark out your own domain. With the passage of years your mission has evolved and broadened. But you have retained a set of values, a sharpness of focus, a quality of intellectual environment. With it all, you *have* had, from the time of your founding, a social concern, and you *are* supremely relevant in your own way. You have good reason to be proud of this university.

**Presidential Positions**

Finally, your unique place among American institutions of learning is a true measure of your good fortune in leadership.

I began these remarks with a lighthearted allusion to the presidency. May I now close by recalling a few words from my own inaugural address some years ago.

"A university is an extraordinarily complex organism. It works in many fields of scholarship. It has obligations to a varied constituency—students, faculty, alumni, and trustees. A university must be administered. As in any great enterprise, there must be a source of prompt, clear-cut decisions and an orderly handling of affairs.

"But good administration, indispensable as it is, is only the beginning. It has been said countless times that the faculty *is* the university. Yet upon the president himself rests the responsibility of creating and maintaining a climate in which both learning and teaching may flourish. This means an intellectual environment in which imaginations are stirred, which fosters confidence that worthwhile things can be done, and where feelings of freedom and security go hand in hand with a sense of obligation and loyalty.

"But there remains to the president one more function of leadership. In the perpetual debate of ideas that is the essence of a university, he must be more than a referee. He must himself be prepared to take positions on matters of educational import. Above all, he must be able to formulate his aims and make clear what he proposes to achieve. And in all these things he must be guided constantly by a vision of the highest goals of his institution."

The character of Rockefeller University today—the extraordinary developments that have taken place here over the past fifteen years—are themselves a monument to the ideals and the leadership of Detlev Bronk. You have been wise and fortunate once again in your choice of his successor. And Frederick Seitz, in his turn, has seen clearly the beckoning of opportunity as he takes this momentous new step in his distinguished career.